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ABSTRACT

Contributed by English teachers across the United States, the activities contained in this booklet are intended to promote the effective teaching of writing and literature. Teaching strategies offered in the first section of the booklet are designed to stimulate language exploration and include activities in which students write family newspapers that include the proper journalistic components; use clustering to write poetry; and use a variety of artistic media to illustrate the landscape of Dante's "Inferno." Activities in the second section, which are designed to stimulate an appreciation and understanding of literature, include discussions in which students cast actors to star in novels the class is studying; select a dozen powerful quotations from Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" and then investigate how Stephen Spielberg treated these passages in his film of the novel; and adopt journalistic roles that enable them to produce a historical newspaper from a time and place depicted in a novel. Teaching ideas in the third section provide the means for students to learn about various stages of the writing process. These include activities in which students become consumer reporters; engage in mocked-up conversations for practice in writing dialogue; and make "poetry earrings" by writing pithy metaphoric statements or haikus on small, rectangular pieces of paper. (SAM)

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IDEAS Plus

A Collection of Practical Teaching Ideas

Book Ten

National Council of Teachers of English
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Foreword

IDEAS Plus and its quarterly companion *NOTES Plus* are the principal benefits of *NCTE Plus* membership. *IDEAS Plus* is sent out at the end of the summer so that teachers will have it in hand as they begin the school year.

The ideas collected in this tenth edition of *IDEAS Plus* come from two sources: ideas submitted at an Idea Exchange session at an NCTE Annual Convention or Spring Conference, and contributions by readers of *NOTES Plus* and *IDEAS Plus.*

1 Language Exploration

In helping our students take command of written and spoken language, we are helping them develop the ability to express themselves precisely and articulately. Activities that encourage students to use imaginative, figurative, and descriptive language hone their critical thinking skills as well as their writing abilities. The strategies presented here are designed to stimulate students' thinking and writing. Since confidence is vital to self-expression, we start with two strategies for building a positive classroom climate and a positive self-image. Subsequent activities promote language exploration through visual and written portraits, poetry writing, musical inspiration, and the power of persuasive language.

The Family Newspaper

Because having a positive classroom climate is so important for English classrooms, I advocate spending time on activities that will contribute to such an atmosphere. These activities should be more substantial than asking students to state their names and tell what they did last summer, but many of the other usual introductory activities are little more than games. Although fun, they are quickly forgotten and do not really build rapport or promote language arts skills.

One of the best climate-building activities that I have seen is for students to create their own family newspaper and to share it with the class. In doing so, students sharpen their interviewing and writing skills, they learn more about their classmates, and we develop a positive classroom climate.

The student and the student's family are the focus for the entire newspaper. Guidelines such as the following will help students as they design and write their newspapers:

1. *Name of Paper:* Choose a unique or catchy name for your newspaper, perhaps incorporating your last name in the title, such as the *Bradford Bugle* or the *Potter Post.*

2. *News Features:* Write news items about those topics that currently concern your family.
3. *Advertisements:* Write ads for any family items that you would like to see, buy, or trade, or for services that you might provide, such as babysitting or lawn care.
4. *Comics/Puzzles/Horoscopes:* Create at least one of these items and try for a tie-in to your family, such as a word puzzle containing the names of your family's favorite pastimes.
5. *Advice Column:* Take on the persona of another family member and write a letter asking for advice of some kind, such as a question pertaining to etiquette, car maintenance, sewing, fashion, or cooking. Then become yourself once again and write a letter in response.
6. *Movies/Television/Home Videos:* Select a movie or television program that you have viewed with your family, or a video made by your family. Write a review, perhaps incorporating comments from other family members.
7. *Editorial:* Write an editorial concerning a topic that is of interest to your family, such as a proposal to close a neighborhood school. Again, you might incorporate opinions of other family members.
8. *Society:* Record the social news of your family, including family trips, events, dinners, or recipes.
9. *Sports:* Write about family sports participation, including attending events or watching television broadcasts.

Caution students at the outset that the family newspapers will be shared with their classmates. They should therefore avoid any information that is highly personal or that might embarrass the family.

Newspapers are best done on sheets of butcher paper, with students handwriting the information. Students may include pictures of family members for illustrations, but due to possible damage or loss I encourage students to use photocopies or cutouts of people from magazines or catalogs who resemble their family.

When students are finished with their newspapers, they form small groups and share what they have written. Groups are changed several times so that students share with many classmates. Students might also select a few sections to read aloud to the entire class and then display the newspaper in the classroom for others to read.

This assignment has been most enjoyable for all involved, and it provides a meaningful introduction to each student. When students discuss themselves and their families, they quickly are seen as unique and become known to their classmates and teacher. The newspaper provides the opportunity for thinking, reading, writing, creativity, sharing with the class, and bonding with family members. It is a good prelude to cooperative learning and the peer-response groups that we soon will be forming. It is also a memento reflecting an important time in a student's life, a reminder that families will surely want to save.

Perhaps most telling is that my students wanted to prepare another newspaper at the end of the year to keep everyone current regarding their families.

Lisa A. Spiegel, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota

Building Self-Esteem with Affirmations

> *Value yourself. You are the only you there will ever be. Therefore, take care that your life speaks well of you.*

Recognizing that self-esteem is often a key factor in determining a student's behavior, I searched for a method through which negative thought processes might be replaced with positive thoughts that would heighten students' self-esteem. I wanted to plant the seeds of uplifting, affirming messages in the minds of my high school English students. I sought to demonstrate a relationship between our choices in life and our perception of our self-worth.

Since a positive environment plays an important role in our ability to think in a positive way, I decided to write weekly affirmations on the board. I composed these messages, and they remained on the board for one week. The students copied down any of the affirmations that encouraged them or that spoke to their hearts. They filed them in their journals or read them daily as they came into the room.

Some of the affirmations that I presented to students are:

> Your life is a journey. You get to choose the destination. Give much thought to the roads on which you travel.
>
> Believing you are worth much is a thought process, just as believing you have no worth is a thought process.

> Changing your thoughts can change your value in your own eyes and in the eyes of others.
>
> If you think you are worth nothing, you won't go after anything that is worth something.
>
> If what goes around comes around, we must be careful to send out what we'd like to receive.

Surprised that their teacher had composed and shared these affirmations with them, my students reacted with interest. I also shared experiences from my own life, and we often discussed actions and real consequences to those actions. I felt it was extremely important for students to understand that if they know their own value, they will make decisions that uphold that value. I tried to impart to my students that though failing at tasks is a part of life, it does not make a person a failure; it simply provides a learning experience so that better decisions can be made in the future.

Each Monday students would ask, "Did you write this one, too?" Often they said, "Last week's was better," or "This one's really good." The positive words validated students' worth and spoke to their needs. I recorded all the affirmations in a notebook for reference, and frequently students asked to copy some for their own use. I prompted them to record any of their own thoughts or those of others that encouraged them or gave them hope. Together we created a bulletin board on which the students placed any affirmations that they felt helped them to develop a positive environment. When I observed this type of writing in their journals, I responded with feedback in an affirming tone. One student who was having a difficult time at home recorded this affirmation: "Nothing can defeat you if you decide that nothing is defeating." She said that those words helped her to persevere during some painful family problems.

As the school year progressed, I realized the definite place for uplifting encouragement in the classroom. Students thirsted for anything that would affirm their worth. Many of the affirmations provided students with insight into the role that our thoughts play in our self-image.

One weekend I was busy and neglected to write a new affirmation for Monday. In every class, I encountered these statements: "Where's our affirmation?" "We look forward to a new one each Monday." "Please write one tonight."

One girl even said, "What happened to the new affirmation? I take these home and share them with my mom. She looks forward to them every Monday. Please have one for tomorrow."

This year will be no different. New affirmations will appear on the board every Monday. A bulletin board will also be designed for affirmations. Positive thoughts will be ever-present for the mind to digest, and the students will again play a role in the process of uplifting and encouraging others. Seeds of growth will continue to be planted, and recognition of the power of positive thoughts and the importance of self-esteem will continue to take root.

Mary Elaine Lindley, Salado High School, Salado, Texas

Visual Approach to Dante

As a teacher of college-bound seniors, I consider my time with them as "the last vital shot." Consequently, I want to give them as much as possible, in as short a time as possible, and by as many different, interesting ways as possible. To get eighteen-year-olds intrigued with hell, purgatory, and heaven is no small chore, but I have been successful in combining a visual approach with the written portrayal of these nebulous places.

Our college-level text, *Writers of the Western World* by Addison Hibbard and Horst Frenz (Houghton Mifflin, 1967) contains four cantos from each book of Dante's *Divine Comedy.* Students begin by reading the cantos from "The Inferno" as a homework assignment. I ask them to make a list of the specific aspects of hell that Dante described. Two weeks after the reading assignment they are asked to turn in a visual representation of what Dante said hell looks like, based on their descriptive lists. Students' visual representations are accompanied by essay explanations, which ensure individuality and which make the assignment less threatening to those with limited artistic abilities. We follow the same procedure a week later with "Purgatory" and then with "Heaven" the following week. The whole procedure takes four to five weeks.

My students have chosen a variety of artistic media to convey the message in their wordless creations, including oils, pastels, watercolors, pencils, mobiles, collages, and dioramas. Often students decide on the same medium for all three representations, lending unity to their creations.

I close the unit by displaying the visual representations on the bulletin board so that students can look for similar elements and different interpretations of the written word.

Darthy K. Davis, Southern Columbia Area High School, Catawissa, Pennsylvania

Guiding Students into Writing Good Poetry

Who among us has not looked with dread upon grading student poetry, upon the shapeless images and mindless metaphors that often characterize student verse? Whose hand has not quivered each time it is called upon to mark a grade on what is certain to be the product of student genius? Often a student will cry in defense of the work, "How can you give me anything less than an *A* when I have expressed my true feelings?" To be frank, I really did not have a viable answer until I discovered a teaching technique that almost guides students into writing good poetry.

It was the final semester of school, and we were winding down with a unit on poetry. I not only wanted to introduce students to poetry that they had never read before, I wanted them to write poetry of their own. I opted to use figurative language as a framework upon which to base the unit, grouping poems according to their use of imagery, metaphor, simile, and personification. For example, Carl Sandburg's "Chicago" and Langston Hughes's "Harlem" are related by their use of vigorous imagery; Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" and Sara Teasdale's "The Hill" are related by their use of symbol.

I began by teaching the figurative devices of metaphor, simile, symbol, and personification, and we read and discussed poems using examples of each. After students had gained a clear concept of these devices and how they are used in poetry, I brought in objects from home to give students practice in writing their own figurative language: a conch shell, a feather duster, an early twentieth-century photograph of my grandmother, a Rubik's Cube puzzle, a polished green onyx egg, an aloe plant, and other items. Students used these objects to create their own examples of figurative language:

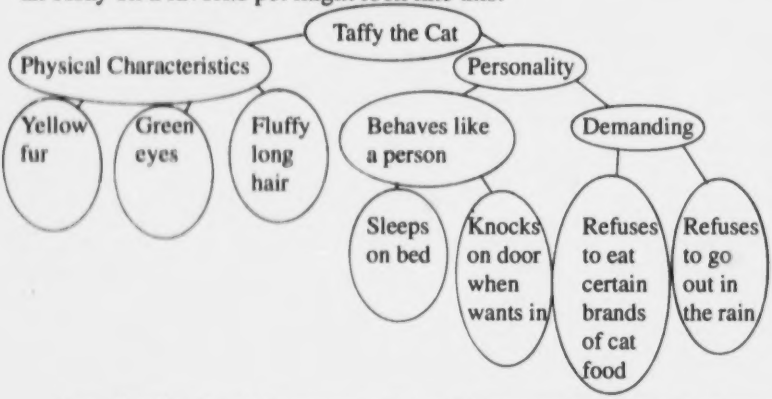
> A seashell is like a tiny world in the ocean.
>
> The picture is as old as time.

> A Rubik's Cube is like travel. You must unravel the paths you take in order to see the end clearly.

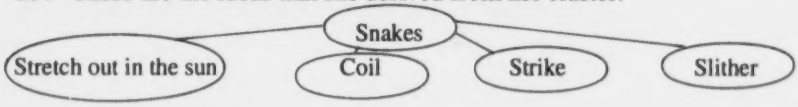
Using this technique, students were not just writing from subjective experience; they were writing subjectively within a certain structure. This imposed structure on student creativity made objective grading possible.

Students were then instructed to select one of their own examples of figurative language and expand it into a poem. When students experienced difficulty creating poems from figurative examples, I introduced the technique of clustering, which I had found to be of value in stimulating ideas during this experiment.

Clustering is a way of organizing thought. Used effectively, it can become a stimulus for new ideas. To cluster, a student begins with a topic circled on the page. He or she then draws lines and succeeding circles to indicate offshoots of the core idea. For example, a student's cluster for an essay on a favorite pet might look like this:



As a stimulus for their poetry writing, I instructed students to cluster their particular example of the figurative device. For example, one student's simile about an aloe plant read: "The plant is like a little snake." Because she was having trouble developing the simile from there, I suggested that she cluster the noun *snakes*. I asked her, "What do snakes do?" These are the ideas that she derived from her cluster:



After clustering the topic, she had an easier time developing a poem:

The plant's limbs are like little snakes,
  Slithering out of a basket,
Striking at the sun,
  Coiling their tails,
Watching everything in sight.

I noticed that other students had similar success using the clustering technique:

The plant's tentacles reach out
  And sting the air.
They buzz with joy.
They crawl like insects
  Over the sides of the pot
    When they are thirsty.
Then comb out their green web
  After a long drink.

The sun is like a burning eye
  That shines over the water.
It searches and watches
  For life around it.

My feelings are slowly changing
  Each time the feather duster takes its turn
Negative turns to positive
  Pain to joy
The beginning to an end.

Using the techniques of clustering and imposed structure, students were delighted with the new prowess they had developed as writers. As a teacher, I was delighted to grade the fruits of their labors.

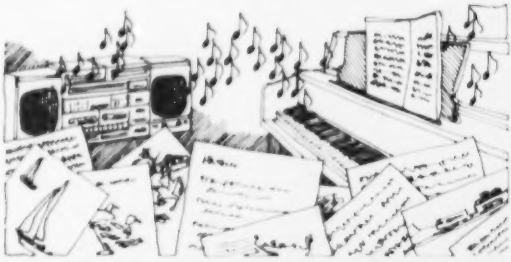
Mary Susan Welch, Stedman Junior High School, Stedman, North Carolina

Music as a Springboard for Creativity

My students sensed something out of the ordinary as soon as they entered our classroom. Upon each desktop was a piece of 12″ × 18″ white drawing paper. An audiocassette player stared blankly at them from the

teacher's desk. Even my tenth-grade honors students enjoy having their curiosity piqued.

Our previous day's discussion had focused on the creative process. We tried to get at the components of creativity, and one commonly accepted idea was that in order to create, one must be able to take existing "substances" (concrete as well as abstract), visualize them in a new way, and synthesize an original creation. What my students were about to embark upon was a short exercise that would result in creatively synthesized impressions. Their blank pieces of paper would become vehicles for original poetry and drawings; their inspiration would be a work of music.



After the usual questions and demands for explanation, I said that we would be listening to a classical selection by the Russian composer Modest Moussorgsky, titled "A Night on a Bald Mountain." I encouraged students to listen carefully, but, more important, to try to feel the music. I would play the piece twice. They were to visualize and develop a mental picture of what the music might represent, then transform their visualizations to the drawing paper. Their interpretive drawings would be accompanied by poems that would, in a uniquely individual way, catch the essence of what Moussorgsky was trying to express in his music. It was understood that pictures and poems would be shared in class the following day, in a manner not unlike those show-and-tell times of old. Our forty-four-minute class period slipped quickly away, but by the time the bell sounded, twenty-seven creative fires had been kindled.

The next day my students delighted in each other's various expressions of Moussorgsky's music. This sharing was enjoyable and entertaining, and, at the same time, made us aware of how complex and truly individual the creative process is.

I then randomly selected a picture/poem combination and presented it to a senior student well known for his talents as a musical composer. This young man, whom we shall call Grant, agreed to study the work and

to synthesize from it an entirely original piece of music, a piano composition expressing his interpretation of the selected picture and poem. I did explain to Grant the creative process that had produced the picture and poem, but he did not know which piece of classical music had served as our "creative springboard."

A few days later, Grant's original piano composition was completed. I assembled my students in the school auditorium for the final stage of our creative synthesis process. After I handed each student a copy of the selected picture and poem, we gathered around the concert grand. Grant explained his attitude toward the picture and accompanying poem and helped us understand the steps involved in developing a musical composition. Soon his fingers were dancing across the keyboard, and the dynamic power of Grant's composition enveloped us in its emotional grasp. My students and I were completely captivated by Grant's creation. Although his music was in no way similar to Moussorgsky's "A Night on a Bald Mountain," it had a distinct mood of its own. My students were listening with a degree of attentiveness that I thought was reserved only for the hottest pop-music performers.

We applauded Grant's fine effort and played for him our recording of "A Night on a Bald Mountain." The creative process had come full circle, and my students were eager to discuss the process that had taken them from a blank piece of drawing paper to a discovery of their own creative potential. Our exercise in creative synthesis had given us all an opportunity to express, to create, and to appreciate ourselves and each other as unique individuals. Perhaps of greatest importance was the pure enjoyment of the experience.

John A. Hendee, East Aurora High School, East Aurora, New York

Memory Poems

One way to introduce students to a poetry unit and to the rich, expressive language of poetry is for them to write their own memory poems. Students begin on more comfortable footing by writing a prose paragraph explaining a childhood experience or describing a person who influenced them. I encourage them to use exact and detailed descriptions.

Next, students look at their compositions and circle or underline those words and phrases that they especially like or that they find colorful, vivid, or expressive.

Now they have in hand the rich poetic language needed for their poems. The final step is to assemble these selected words and phrases into a memory poem.

Here is a description that one of my students wrote:

> When I was about nine years old, my only living great-grandmother died. She was about eighty, and I loved her so much. I miss her now.
>
> My great-grandmother, Alice, was very stubborn. She lived in a retirement home in Cedar Falls for about fifteen years. She hated everyone at the home. She wanted to be treated like a normal person, but everyone treated her like she was old and could do nothing for herself.
>
> Once when we visited, the nurse came in to give great-grandmother her medicine, and she sent the nurse away, yelling, "Can't you see I have company?"
>
> My grandmother did not want to share her room with anyone, but she always had to. She would swear at her roommates and try to kick them out.
>
> I loved my great-grandmother. I wish she were still there for me. Why did you leave, Grandma?

This student then wrote the following memory poem:

> Grandma Come Back
> Great-grandmother Alice,
> love,
> stubborn
> retirement home,
> hated
> swore at them,
> kicked out nurses,
> wish she were here
> Grandma

Carol J. Pierce, West High School, Waterloo, Iowa

The Art of Persuasion

A pressing concern in this visual society is that our students understand the art of persuasion. One of my most successful assignments asks that

students use persuasive language, with a keen understanding of voice and audience.

In our first-year English writing program we spend approximately half the semester on five writing assignments: personal narrative, character sketch, contrast/comparison, description, and a persuasive essay using the classic five-paragraph approach. During this time we teach or reinforce the process of planning, drafting, and revising before students edit and print. (We have the advantage of working in a Macintosh computer lab using Microsoft Word or a tutorial program that we have developed with help from the University of Minnesota, but working in a computer lab is not necessary for these assignments to be successful.) The students generate their own topics so they take ownership more readily.

When students have revised and printed their five papers, they turn to a text that allows us to use the same five writing assignments, this time basing their writing on the reading. We have had success using Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird,* with its colorful characters, regionalism, and multiple themes. The assignments use the five strategies learned earlier in the course: a personal narrative of one of the children's escapades, told from Dill's or Calpurnia's point of view; a sketch of one of the main characters; a comparison/contrast of Atticus and Aunt Alexandra (or of the film and book versions); a description of the courtroom scene from the balcony; and the persuasion paper.

This fifth assignment, the persuasion paper, comes after we consider the trial and various townspeople's reactions to Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson. At this point, students take on the persona of any Maycomb County citizen, named or unnamed, in the novel. Students decide whether that persona would want Atticus returned to the Alabama legislature. Then they write a letter to the editor of the *Maycomb Tribune,* persuading its mainly white readers either to elect Atticus or to vote him out of office. Students are encouraged to use language appropriate to the region, the persona, and the times. They begin with an opening position, develop three paragraphs of support, each distinctly different and each more persuasive for their given audience, and, in the final paragraph, call for a yes or no vote for Atticus.

Perhaps because the thesis is so concrete, students readily see the effectiveness of the five-paragraph essay; they can get to the task at

hand. I work with them to keep their supporting paragraphs distinctive, yet persuasive. This calls for earnest consideration of their audience. Their choice of language must also reflect the persona that they have selected. To succeed in the art of persuasion, students must realize the importance and close relationship of purpose, audience, and voice. They also learn to recognize that language can be powerfully persuasive.

We share the letters to the editor in class. They generate laughter as well as debate, as students attempt to be a 1930s racist Maycomb citizen or a folksy Miss Maudie. But the assignment works well for emphasizing the importance of analyzing any persuasive language. At the same time, it gives students practice with an effective writing strategy.

Margaret Anderson, Totino-Grace High School, Fridley, Minnesota

A Backward Glance Forward

It was 1989, and my seventh graders and I were involved in an interdisciplinary review of the vice-presidential debates of 1988. When Democratic candidate Lloyd Bentsen told Republican opponent Dan Quayle, "I knew John F. Kennedy. . . . you're no JFK," one student startled me by remarking, "John Kennedy and Jack Kennedy—were they two different Kennedys?" I suggested that Eve could find out the answer by interviewing her mother, who had been a child during the sixties. The next day a far more knowledgeable Eve shared her mother's factual responses to the John/Jack confusion, as well as her mother's personal views that any shared ideological similarities between Quayle and Kennedy were almost nonexistent.

As the class and I listened to Eve's spirited oral history, I was impressed by how the comments of Eve's mother on this contemporary issue had engaged Eve's interest in the political scene of the sixties. Our textbook readings had imparted similar factual data, but had not excited Eve or her classmates. Other students asked me, "Can I interview my parents?" I began to see how the approach of the backward glance forward could work with any contemporary issue.

I began by selecting a key contemporary event. For my language arts/history class I chose the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated, November 22, 1963. Students realized that the event occurred when many of their parents were about the same age as the students, twelve

years old. They generated the following list of questions to ask their parents about Kennedy's assassination:

> How old were you and where were you when Kennedy died?
>
> How did you feel when you first heard the news or saw it televised?
>
> How did your friends react to the news?
>
> How did the different members of your family react?
>
> How do you feel about this event now?
>
> What are your feelings and ideas about the way in which the assassination affected your personal life?
>
> How do you feel the assassination changed U.S. history?
>
> In what ways, if any, have your initial feelings about Kennedy's death altered?

After we read selected texts, reviewed biographical videotapes of JFK, and watched current TV programs and documentaries on the assassination, the students came up with additional questions for their parents:

> Who do you think killed (or arranged for the killing of) John Kennedy?
>
> How did you react to Oswald's death on TV?
>
> What do you think about Oswald's death now?
>
> What are your reactions to JFK's extramarital affairs and the other revelations about him that have come out since his death?

Once students had developed their pilot questionnaire to provide some framework for their parent interviews, we drafted a note to all the parents, soliciting their assistance in our investigation of JFK.

Parental response to our invitation for this school/family oral history collaboration transformed the project into an unexpectedly rich, joint community/school commemorative convocation. Many parents sent in items or called to tell me that they had periodicals, photographs, and memorabilia from the JFK era. Some parents, delighted by their children's responses, suggested that their own school class pictures and autograph albums be incorporated into an examination of artifacts from the sixties. One mother sent in jewelry from the sixties as a beginning for such a collection. One father who was a professional photographer donated photographs that he had taken of John and Robert Kennedy. The

students and I found these to be a valuable visual "testimony" that combined with the oral responses. We spent a class period poring over photocopies of the original *Life* and *Look* assassination issues that were loaned by parents.

Our examination of these albums, photographs, jewelry, and periodicals generated further student inquiries about hippies, Elvis, drugs, Vietnam, nuclear protests, and Marilyn Monroe. Students added questions about these subjects to their lists of topics to explore with a panel of "living witnesses" to the JFK assassination—their parents. Despite parental jobs and community responsibilities, we conducted four panel discussions focusing on various aspects of the sixties, with parents discussing their own special areas of interest and sharing their experiences. The sixties school pictures supplied by one parent produced a comparison of dress and behavior standards in New York City public junior high schools in the sixties and in the eighties. One mother talked about how her mother had worked for John Kennedy. Another mother displayed purses, campaign buttons, and placards that she had collected from Kennedy's presidential campaign. A fourth parent laughingly confessed to having been a hippie in the sixties and heard what students of the eighties thought that meant.

After the forum, both parents and students wrote about their reactions to the event itself and their insights into one another's thinking processes. I also formed a committee of parent curriculum developers. Together we planned further family/school experiences: a sixties multimedia festival with multidisciplinary trivia bees, an artifact exhibit curated by students and parents, a photo exhibit of "family" and "event" photos, a Martin Luther King/ERA commemorative project paralleling our Kennedy experience, and a parent/child/teacher publication of our pilot JFK exploration.

We discovered that parental input can add to our examination of such contemporary issues and technological developments as space exploration, computers, and medical advances, and can make them less abstract. Together, parents and teachers can pilot powerful projects that involve the school and the community in collaborations linking the twenty-first century to the twentieth. By looking backward, we can gain a new perspective on the future.

Rose C. Reissman, Community School District #25, Flushing, New York

2 Literature

As English teachers, we sometimes feel that instilling a love of literature in our students can be a daunting task, as we compete for their attention along with videos, TV, tape players, and video games. Well-proven teaching strategies can help us convey to students the power and the beauty of a well-crafted novel or play or poem. Classic and contemporary literature can challenge our students' critical thinking skills and can help them appreciate the written word. Moreover, by combining reading and thinking, students can experience the pure enjoyment of quality literature. In the classroom activities that follow, our colleagues describe some approaches to teaching literature. In some activities these teachers make use of students' interest in current technology to stimulate that love of literature by having students produce videotapes and become casting directors for movie versions of assigned readings. Other teachers connect students with reading by means of a simulated nuclear attack, a historical newspaper, masks and hats, and an American literature journal.

Survival of the Fittest

As my eleventh-grade American literature students read *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank, I wanted them to experience what it would feel like to know that a nuclear attack was imminent—short of building a bomb shelter in my classroom. It occurred to me (and later to my students) how incredibly lucky the characters in the novel were in the circumstances that befell them, including their gender, location, job skills, and available supplies. In the "game" of survival of the fittest, they appeared to have conquered all.

To discover what my students would do if faced with decisions similar to those faced by the characters in the book, I created a simulated "Day before D-Day" in the classroom. I explained the scenario to my students: They had just found out through a reliable source that an unknown foreign power would launch a nuclear attack on the United

States the following day. They would be able to take refuge on a small estate located on the edge of a town in Florida. The estate had its own source of water, an artesian well, which would not be contaminated. They would be at least 100 miles from any likely bombing targets and therefore not likely to receive much, if any, fallout.

Students formed groups of four and had one hour in which to (1) decide on their own identity and that of the three people who would stay with them on the estate, (2) collect all available money, and (3) buy all the supplies that they deemed necessary to last for the rest of their lives. Time was of the essence. It was survival of the fittest.

Of course, the decision of which people would take refuge with them on the estate was not easy. Each group was given a worksheet that listed fifteen persons to choose from, including information about each person's gender, job skills, amount of money available in the bank, and medical history. If a person had valuable job skills, such as a doctor, he or she had very little money in the bank or had an affliction that required medical attention, such as diabetes. Similarly, those with fewer valuable skills had a larger amount of money, which made them more attractive choices. Although it was not emphasized, the gender of the character would restrict some choices. Because there were one-third fewer women to choose from, a careful selection had to be made in order to propagate. The choice was made even more personal when students found out that they each were to assume the identity of one of these persons.

Here is the list of characters from which students were to choose:

Job/Gender	*Available $*	*Medical Information*
Doctor, female	1,000	glasses
Nurse, male	8,000	diabetes
Sheriff, male	5,000	allergic to bees
Homemaker, female	10,000	pregnant

Farmer, male	750	bad knee
Electrician, female	1,000	hearing aids
Game show host, male	12,000	low IQ
Plumber, male	2,000	only one arm
Mechanical engineer, female	7,500	pacemaker
Retired marine general, male	6,500	blind
Librarian, female	4,000	asthma
Carpenter, male	800	claustrophobic
Dentist, male	2,500	high blood pressure
Veterinarian, female	5,000	needs root canal
Commercial fisher, male	500	wooden leg

I encouraged students to try to think of everything as they made their choices. "Remember," I stressed, "this is for the rest of your lives. It's survival of the fittest."

After selecting an identity for each person in their group of four, the students combined the money from the respective bank accounts. This sum was used to "buy" a list of items that they felt they would need. Students were to indicate the approximate cost of each item, rounded off in hundreds due to the large quantities bought (this also made adding easier). Whether the monetary amounts were realistic was immaterial, other than showing that some articles had more importance than others. The amount of money spent on personal articles caused some interesting arguments over what constituted a real "necessity" and what did not. Most students took this activity very seriously; all conferences were whispered so that no other group had an advantage over the others. At the end of the hour, I collected each list and made five copies, one for each student in the group and one for myself, to discourage additions to the list. (On their own, however, some students later took the time to make much more complete lists of supplies to buy in the case of a nuclear attack.)

On the following day, "D-Day," and each subsequent day, I announced several simulated situations or conditions that had arisen due to the nuclear attack, most of which came from *Alas, Babylon*. Each person was to write a log entry explaining how he or she coped with the situation,

using available supplies and the expertise of the four people on the estate. Sample situations included the following:

1. The electricity is out. The following items in your home run on electricity: refrigerator and freezer full of meat and produce, washer and dryer, clocks, radios, stove, air conditioner, water heater, toaster, coffee maker, VCR/TV, battery charger, and all lights.
2. Communication links are no longer in service; telephones and telegraphs are inoperable, and there is no mail service.
3. The banks are closed; no one can get money out of the bank or use checks or credit cards.
4. All groceries, hardware, and necessities are gone from stores.
5. Gas stations no longer have fuel.
6. All prisoners are freed from jail and are marauding the countryside.
7. The clinics and hospitals are being trashed by drug addicts; there are no drugs available, and surgery is no longer possible.
8. The morgue is full to overflowing; the mortician refuses to work.
9. The doctor is attacked and robbed. Her car is stolen, and her glasses are broken.
10. The fish are not biting—a seasonal lull.
11. All batteries are no longer working.
12. The pregnant homemaker has her baby; she needs milk and diapers.
13. One person in your group develops appendicitis.
14. Winter arrives; no garden vegetables are available.
15. Spring arrives; do you have the supplies needed to plant a garden?
16. There is a desperate need for salt; the only way to get any is to travel by boat.
17. There is a desperate need for sugar; there is a man who will trade honey for whiskey.
18. Wild dogs are attacking your domestic animals.
19. Armadillos are eating your garden plants.
20. The librarian has discovered a book on edible native plants.

21. One male and one female in your group want to get married.
22. People from bigger cities that were attacked are stopping and begging for food.
23. People living one mile upstream from you are no longer bothering to dispose of waste properly.
24. A ham radio announcer warns of an imminent second attack.

As students responded to these situations in their log entries, they became very creative in how they chose to compensate when they had forgotten a much-needed item or how they solved a problem that they had not anticipated. Students were writing daily with a minimum of grumbling, and many became so interested in the book that they read ahead to find out which situations would really happen. As it happened, the activity coincided with the Persian Gulf conflict and was taken quite seriously as students watched the military events actually taking place. This activity would work well with any book dealing with the arms race or nuclear war, such as *Z for Zachariah* by Robert C. O'Brien or *The Hunt for Red October* by Tom Clancy.

Diane M. Kujak, Lincoln High School, Alma Center, Wisconsin

Starring in a Novel

Understanding, analyzing, and discussing literary characters can oftentimes be daunting to high school and college students and frustrating to English teachers. Getting our students to think deeply and do more than a superficial review of the characters about whom they read is a great challenge for us.

One method that has been successful for me is moviemaking. As the producers and directors, my students have to select appropriate actors to play the characters in whatever novel we are studying. Then they have to justify their choices by explaining why those actors would be best for the role.

For example, after reading *The Scarlet Letter,* we focused on Hester Prynne. I asked the class which modern female screen star could play Hester and why. The class wag immediately yelled out, "Madonna!" Much to his surprise, I took that as a serious answer and asked the other students whether they believed that Madonna could do justice to Hawthorne's Hester. A number of students said no, explaining that while

Madonna is strong-willed and cares little about what others think of her, she would never stand idly by and let the townspeople judge her. She would have to do something singular and bizarre. One student suggested Meryl Streep, and many classmates agreed, stating that she could ably demonstrate Hester's inner strength while outwardly appearing meek and submissive.

This approach works because we are dealing with people who are already familiar to students. Then we can move toward an understanding of the particular literary character. I admit that the technique does cater to students' already overloaded diet of movies and television, but by tapping into something with which students are already acquainted, I can enhance their understanding of literature.

Even my quiet students are eager to join in the discussion and to suggest their favorite actors. Occasionally I let students suggest any public figure, living or dead, to play the role of a literary character. One class decided to select their actors from the teachers at our school. That discussion was indeed lively and gave some interesting insights into how the teenage mind perceives teachers.

I have also had good results when my class has contained people of widely varying ages. Students will invariably date themselves when they call out their suggestions. I use this as an opportunity for students to learn about and better understand one another and the different times in which they have lived.

Robert HB Dela-Cruz, Saint Mary College, Leavenworth, Kansas

Portrait of a Contemporary Artist

Works by contemporary writer Alice Walker have stimulated critical thinking in my high school English classroom.

We start by reading Walker's *Living by the Word* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), a wonderful group of thought-provoking essays written in the 1970s and 1980s in a variety of styles and tones. The essays range from political to environmental to spiritual to personal, with much overlap.

Students respond to the essays in their composition books, in both guided and unguided writings. They also discuss the themes of the essays in small groups and then come together to compare notes.

We read some of the essays aloud in class. I select readers to "become" Walker and have them rehearse the day before their presentations. Most of the essays take fifteen to twenty-five minutes to read aloud, leaving us fifteen minutes for class discussion.

After this introduction to Alice Walker, we read her major novel, *The Color Purple*. I tie the two very different works together, asking students what Walker is trying to do with the character Shug and how Walker's own viewpoints on love, feminism, and religion (topics that she explored in her essays) are reflected in her novel.

We also view together the film version of *The Color Purple*. Students first select a dozen powerful quotations from the novel that moved them when they read, and then they watch to see how Steven Spielberg treated these quotations in the film. Students might meet in small groups to compare the book and the movie.

The unit gives students the opportunity to see how a contemporary writer reveals her feelings on current topics in both nonfictional and fictional writing.

Benjamin Ayres, Grier School, Tyrone, Pennsylvania

Nonteaching Teaching

This idea came to me several years ago when I realized there were more short stories to cover than there was time left to cover them. Also, I was interested in learning what students would discover on their own—about the stories, the authors, the writing, and their own writing. And it was a way to avoid the routine of "you read it/we discuss it/you take a test." I knew I was on the right track when one student commented, "And what are *you* going to do while *we* do all the work?" Of course, I am involved in the activity, which I call "nonteaching teaching," but students take responsibility for collaborative learning, reading as writers, and analyzing short stories.

Here is how my nonteaching teaching works. The class forms groups of four or five students. Each group chooses a different story from our anthology. Students read the story aloud in their particular group, stopping for discussion when questions arise about the story's meaning or interpretation and rereading when necessary to answer their questions. I circulate during the reading, but rather than answer questions directly, I help steer the discussion so that students can find their own answers.

Conversation continues as students identify elements of short fiction, examine how the author wrote the story, and reflect on their own writing. Students may wish to take notes during these discussions.

Students complete their examination of the story with an oral presentation to the entire class in which they report on what the group discovered about the story and the author. Class members ask questions to clarify comments or to request additional information. I explain that all students will be responsible for this material, so again they may wish to take notes.

The test that I give on this material consists of simply one question: "Tell me what you learned." There are no wrong answers, and I learn from the responses as well.

This method has been so successful that I have adapted it to cover almost any unit in my English classes. In one week we can thoroughly cover at least six stories. Students like the change of pace and say that they learn more this way because they learn what *they need* to know, not what I want them to know. They feel that their discussions lead them to a better understanding of the stories and of short fiction, clarification of the reading-writing connection, and insights into their own writing. Especially satisfying to me are the comments from the usually reluctant students, who find it easier to express themselves and to offer their ideas in a small-group setting.

Mardie Robinson, Flight School, Casper, Wyoming

A Modern-Day Frankenstein

One of the most difficult problems in the high school literature classroom is convincing juniors and seniors that required reading can be fun. Many students are extremely candid about not reading required novels.

For the past two years, during our study of the Romantic period of British literature, one of the books that I have asked students to read is *Mutation* by Robin Cook. Students are surprised to be assigned a book for which no *Cliffs Notes* or videos exist. Word quickly spreads that the book is not like others that students have had to read for classes; this book is good! Within a few days, students are reading it between classes and during lunch, and they are actually enjoying the assignment. All students complete the book in about a week and cannot wait to discuss it. After one class period of sharing thoughts and impressions about the novel, I

introduce *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and ask students to compare and contrast the two works.

Some students find it amazing that an enjoyable contemporary novel could be so similar to a story written in 1818. Other students analyze the theme of tampering with human life and begin to search for correlations and to question why the issue would have been raised during these two periods in history. Some students find a deeper appreciation of the classics, while others simply discover that they can find pleasure in reading.

It is rewarding to see students at every ability level enjoying reading and deriving substantive value from literature.

Cynthia Ann Bowman, Father Lopez High School, Daytona Beach, Florida

Historical Newspapers

Time: Summer. Not too long ago.
Place: A small town.

As my American literature students read these stage directions preceding the preface to Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's *Inherit the Wind,* I can almost hear the word *boring* as it flashes across their minds. I persuade them not to judge the play on these few words, and we continue reading the preface, which informs us that the play is based on the famous Scopes trial, nicknamed "The Monkey Trial." As we discuss the historical background of this trial, my students begin to develop a genuine interest in *Inherit the Wind,* for like the people of Hillsboro, they too live in a small, religious community.

As we make our way through the play, I announce the culminating project: students are to create a July 1925 newspaper for the town of Hillsboro. I explain the project before we finish reading and discussing the play so that students can begin working on their ideas. The newspaper takes approximately one week of class time to complete. My students enjoy this assignment because they are familiar with the trivialities of a small-town newspaper and welcome the chance to satirize the mundane police reports, the tedious letters to the editor, and the ever-popular "did you hear?" items.

To assure that there are sufficient jobs for everyone, I have my students form two groups and then select a newspaper job from the following descriptions:

Editor
- makes a list of all job assignments
- makes sure that all articles and ads are turned in at the scheduled time
- proofreads the final draft
- writes an editorial

Layout Editor
- assists the editor
- designs the banner and layout of the newspaper

Advice Columnist
- selects a name for the column (such as Dear Sarah Ann)
- writes a letter or two seeking advice (each letter must address a concern of one of the characters)
- answers the letters

Astrologer
- writes predictions or warnings for some of the main characters and assigns them fictitious astrological signs

Political Cartoonist
- draws two political cartoons that deal with issues raised by the trial

Letter-to-the-Editor Columnist
- writes a letter to the editor on an issue raised by the trial (such as defending or opposing censorship, defending or opposing the teaching of evolution, defending or opposing Bert Cates, defending a person's right to think, or mocking the circus atmosphere of the town)

Social Editor (Gossip Columnist)
- writes typical small-town gossip
- reports on social events (such as a tea for Mrs. Brady)

Feature Writer (one or two students)
- writes an article on evolution, creationism, or fundamentalism
- writes an article on the previous trials of Henry Drummond (Clarence Darrow) or the political life of Matthew Harrison Brady (William Jennings Bryant)

Court Reporter
- reports on various courtroom activities, such as jury selection and questioning of witnesses

Classified Ads Editor (one or two students)
- writes want ads (such as rooms for rent, job opening for biology teacher, job openings for concessionaires)
- writes and draws ads for movies of the day
- writes and draws ads for cars of the day

Typist
- types all articles
- gives articles to headline writer

Headline Writer
- writes catchy headlines for all articles
- gives articles to proofreader

Proofreader
- checks for such problems as typos, errors in punctuation, and misspellings
- gives articles to editor

The first duty of each group is to fill the job of editor. To entice student volunteers, I award double credit for the project. Double credit is also given to the layout editor, since these two jobs require the most work. Students sign up for the other job assignments according to their own interests. Depending on the class size, some jobs may be combined or may involve additional students. Once each newspaper staff is established, students decide on a name for their newspaper, such as the *Hillsboro Gazette, Hillsboro Times,* or *Tennessee Tribune.*

Students are reminded that the newspaper is for July 1925. All articles and ads must pertain to that time period. Students may research some of the real people and events in the actual Scopes trial, but the names, the actions, and the setting must reflect the play.

When the newspapers are completed, I post a copy of each group's newspaper on the bulletin board so that students from all my classes can read one another's papers.

Besides the interest and enthusiasm displayed by the students, the newspapers promote the various writing skills, writing styles, organizational skills, and artistic talents employed by the students in letter

writing, persuasive writing, narrative writing, drawing, editing, and researching.

Kathleen Wurn, Medina Valley High School, Castroville, Texas

Review with Character Get-Togethers

The end of each school year inevitably brings the same set of challenges: how to prepare students for a cumulative final exam; how to enable them to see the overall patterns and thematic concerns that directly or indirectly bind the year's literature selections together; how to encourage them to synthesize what they have learned and relate to that material in new ways. Too often, students have trouble with all of these because they tend to treat each work of literature covered in the class as an isolated entity, one having no connection to anything else. I have developed an end-of-year project that not only meets all these needs, but also gives students an opportunity to use creative collaborative techniques at a point in the year when their attention is beginning to turn toward summer.

Using the same basic idea that Steve Allen used in his "Meeting of the Minds" television series of a few years ago, I create small-group discussion topics based on the literature selections for the year or the semester. Each group has a title that joins the works together and is given a specific topic to discuss. As an example, I developed the following discussion groups for my American literature classes:

1. American Dreamers
   Participants: Jay Gatsby *(The Great Gatsby),* Tom Wingfield *(The Glass Menagerie),* poet Langston Hughes, Myrtle Wilson *(The Great Gatsby),* Lennie Small *(Of Mice and Men),* and George Milton *(Of Mice and Men)*
   Topic: What their dreams are and what their definition or vision of the American Dream is, including where each goes right or wrong in their attempts to achieve their desires.
2. Women Working to Survive in Society
   Participants: Hester Prynne *(The Scarlet Letter),* Daisy Buchanan *(The Great Gatsby),* Laura and Amanda Wingfield *(The Glass Menagerie),* and Curley's wife *(Of Mice and Men)*
   Topic: Women's role in society and the difficulties they each face in their own lives.

3. Self-Destructive Obsessives
   Participants: Captain Ahab *(Moby Dick),* Roger Chillingworth *(The Scarlet Letter),* Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale *(The Scarlet Letter),* Captain Isaiah Bartlett *(Where the Cross Is Made),* and Nat Bartlett *(Where the Cross Is Made)*
   Topic: The power of obsessions and how their obsessions drive them to doom and destruction.
4. Rites of Passage
   Participants: Henry Fleming *(Red Badge of Courage),* Nick Carraway *(The Great Gatsby),* Pearl *(The Scarlet Letter),* and Cal Trask *(East of Eden)*
   Topic: What I learned about myself and society by observing those around me and by experiencing life.
5. Men's Role in Society: Dominators or Not?
   Participants: Tom Buchanan *(The Great Gatsby),* Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale *(The Scarlet Letter),* Adam Trask *(East of Eden),* George Wilson *(The Great Gatsby),* and Curley *(Of Mice and Men)*
   Topic: Men's role in society and as husbands or fathers.

To help place the various works of literature and literary characters into the discussion groups and to prepare students to work with these discussion topics independently, students might brainstorm which characters are most appropriate for each topic. Similar topics may be developed for any grade level and type of literature.

Once students have divided into groups and selected a particular character, the task before them is to develop a creative presentation in which the various characters have an opportunity to "come to life" and interact with one another. I remind students that not only do the characters have to discuss the assigned topic, but that the characters must speak and behave in a manner continually consistent with the characters as their authors presented them. Hester Prynne, for example, would most likely emphasize selflessness, courage, and sacrifice in her discussion of women's role in society, not domination and free will.

Following are the instructions that I give my students to explain the project format and my grading criteria:

1. Your group will be assigned a character scenario to present to the class.

2. Your presentation should be about ten minutes long, no more than fifteen.
3. You will be graded in the following areas:
   - Validity of content—characters should say only what would seem logical, given our knowledge of them through reading and discussion.
   - Creativity and originality—feel free to use props, costumes, visual aids, and so on.
   - Depth of topic discussion.
   - Preparedness—use notes or scripts if needed.
4. The more you can "get into" the minds of your characters, the better the presentation.
5. Everyone must participate in both the writing and the presentation.
6. Your format may be discussion, interview, talk show, point/counterpoint debate, "You Are There," and so on.
7. Discussion should clearly reflect the characters and their particular point of view.
8. Use your logic and your imagination!

Students initially are attracted by the creative aspects of this project and generally relate well to it. Relatively painlessly, they embark on a collaborative effort that involves reviewing each work in their own topic area to see how it fits the assignment; discussing each character in depth to determine what the view of each would be on the issue in question, and what specific events from the literary works support those views; and combining all that information into a format that will hold the attention of the entire class. I truly cannot imagine a better review.

Most important, I have found that after students have presented their projects, they are better able to write cumulative essays or answer test questions involving several works of literature. In addition, once students have successfully internalized these connections between characters and works, they have a good chance of carrying those connections on to subsequent years of literary studies. A case in point is one eleventh-grade student who participated in the "self-destructive obsessives" group, which included Captain Ahab. The following year, this student's hand shot into the air as we read Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Excitedly, he pointed out a connection that he saw between Ahab and the

Mariner—that both had gone against nature and both had caused others to suffer and die in the process. I cannot ask for a better success story.

Joy Brown Preble, Oak Ridge High School, Conroe, Texas

Videotape Tales

I have found that a contemporary medium can work well with a fourteenth-century classic. One of the most popular assignments among my senior students has been videotaping the marriage tales from *The Canterbury Tales.*

Day 1. Students bring to class contemporary articles concerning marriage. Discussion follows.

Day 2. Students examine their medieval newspaper (containing student research on the time period) and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* to understand the roles of women and the view of marriage during medieval times. Students form four small groups, and each group is assigned the reading of one of Chaucer's marriage tales: "The Nun's Priest's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "The Franklin's Tale," or "The Clerk's Tale."

Day 3. Students are given the following guidesheet of video requirements (which is an adaptation of criteria required for participation in a national competition for student-produced media, sponsored by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology).

Criteria Guidesheet for the Video

Missing elements will be circled below. Strong areas will be noted with stars.

1. Presentation requirements:
   a. Title card plus credits card (remember to give credit to all musical and literary references)
   b. Originality and creativity
   c. Continuity (action flows from scene to scene)
   d. Audio—clear, free of background noises; dialogue; variety of voice, music, sound effects; appropriate to the story
   e. Special effects—fading, dissolving, superimposing, fast or slow motion
   f. Graphics—neatness, creativity, computer

g. Content—communicates the story, includes adequate number of details for viewer to identify the story, maintains focus of the assignment
h. Eye contact with participants where appropriate, cue cards hidden from view
i. Audience reaction and interest
j. Unity and coherence (plan and purpose must be linked by some common thread)
k. Basic speech guidelines
l. Copyright
m. Technical—focus, lighting, composition (camera angle and balance)
n. Tone—consistent
o. Possible techniques—puppet show, fabliau, frame story, talk show, fable, allegory, medieval romance, ballad, dramatization, news show, game show, interview, poetry, time travel, other
p. Refrains from references to drugs, to excessive violence, or to alcohol
q. Overall—adequate development of topic to create the idea, mood, or message
r. Time—no more than eleven minutes

2. Required information from the story:
   a. References to original setting (time and place)
   b. Adequate inclusion of major characters—to include description, actions, thoughts, reactions of others to the character
   c. Adequate references to the plot (problem, climax, solution)
   d. Adequate focus on the theme (for *The Canterbury Tales,* focus on marriage)
   e. Adequate details to represent the time period

At this time I show the class a student-produced video of "The Pardoner's Tale." We discuss strengths and weaknesses in the video, according to the guidesheet. In addition, I always offer to film each group's presentation. However, students are familiar with videos and have always opted to film their videos outside of school. I allow time for students to discuss possible approaches to filming and remind them that the focus is on marriage during the Middle Ages.

Day 4. Two weeks have passed, in which students have filmed their videos. They bring the videos to class for viewing and critique.

Day 5. Students discuss the varying views of marriage as seen in the four videos of *The Canterbury Tales.*

Day 6. This is test day. Students are responsible for all four marriage tales. I ask them to discuss the tales in an essay question concerning the roles of women during the Middle Ages.

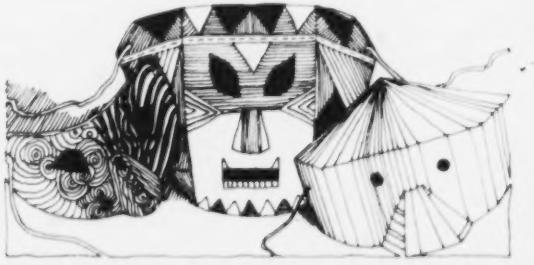
Student reactions to this video assignment have been most favorable. They have recognized the role of creativity in planning the videos, the importance of collaboration, and their own skills as actors. And some learned the hard way that "procrastination hurts."

Patricia R. Grimes, Woodbridge High School, Woodbridge, Virginia

Masks and Monologues

In an attempt to entice the average ninth grader to get more enjoyment from the required reading of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* I ask that my students celebrate their own masked ball wearing masks that they have created.

I supply the basic masks (which can be purchased in quantity at half-price the day after Halloween) and urge students to embellish the masks with feathers, sequins, leather, or lace trim. They are to select an intangible, an abstract quality, an emotion, or a feeling, and then decorate their own mask to represent this particular feeling or quality. Then they are to write an original poem, essay, or piece of creative writing that explains the emotion or quality that the mask depicts. The following day students don their masks while reading their writings aloud. We display the "masks and monologues" in the school showcase and publish a few in the school's literary magazine.



Later, as we read *Romeo and Juliet* and see the movie, students are particularly excited when a scene depicts an emotion that they have

identified as theirs, and they add a quotation from the play that is appropriate to the mask. At the conclusion of the unit, students realize that in just one play, Shakespeare portrays an entire range of human emotions, some that students have intensely felt themselves.

This is an activity that would be effective with numerous other plays or literary works. As the following writing samples demonstrate, creating the masks puts students in the mood for creative writing.

Worrying

The world could run out of chocolate
I could wake up short and fat one day
My brother could read all my love letters
And blackmail me until I pay!
Maryland could make the driving age twenty
The basketball hoop could come crashing down on my head
I could run out of things to worry about
And have to do my English homework instead.

Brian

Confusion

According to the dictionary, confusion is a lack of certainty or the power to act decisively. To me, confusion is bewilderment or not understanding something. I am confused when my friends fight and then try and force me to pick sides. Do I choose the person who I feel is right, or do I choose the person who I feel is the better friend? Also, I am confused when I ride in the car with my mother. She is insulted when I tell her where to go, but she is upset when I don't tell her that she's going the wrong way. Should I tell her where to go, or should I let her try all four roads at a four-way intersection before she chooses the right one? I was especially confused last year in algebra. I just couldn't grasp the concept of word problems. In conclusion, confusion is something we put up with every day and is just an inconvenience.

Stephanie

Kathryn A. Megyeri, Sherwood High School, Sandy Spring, Maryland

From Literature to Life: American Literature Journals

Most students, even the more motivated and able ones, do not have the time (or make the time) to read books in addition to the assigned "traditional" texts. And teachers' concern with covering mandated content, sometimes to the exclusion of making connections between that content and real-world experiences, often makes our students better consumers of information than critical and literate thinkers about issues and problems. The following activity can make literature and the concepts that it introduces more meaningful. Students take the ideas from classroom reading and discussion and link them to ideas that they gain from outside reading. I have used this activity as a third-quarter assignment for honors and college-bound American literature students; the results have been individual, interesting, and thought-provoking.

Set the stage for the activity by explaining to students that true learning is not the ability to recall specific, isolated bits of information. Rather, it is the ability to make connections between all that is presented in school and all that exists outside of school.

Students will have two months to create an American literature journal of twenty to thirty pages. The journal will include materials that have been photocopied or cut out of newspapers and magazines, with intelligent, meaningful comments about the clippings. All the materials should in some way reflect on or expand a concept covered in class.

Encourage students to "read, read, and read still more" in as many magazines and newspapers as possible. The only restriction is that they not include material published prior to the start of the school year. Articles may come from local newspapers, newspapers with a national focus (such as *The New York Times, USA Today, Wall Street Journal*), general circulation periodicals (such as *Time, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, Glamour*), and more specialized publications (such as *Smithsonian, Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker*). In addition to the regular articles, suggest that students read cartoons, editorials, letters, columns, and reviews.

Start students out with some general concepts derived from previous literature assignments, such as the following:

scientific experimentation/medical ethics
morality
classic horror

any information on authors' lives or works
civil disobedience
the English language/vocabulary study
art or music as a reflection of culture
commemoration of historical events
appropriate movie or book reviews
classic works

Any other concepts or themes that have been discussed in class are appropriate and encouraged. Students are not to overuse a particular subject or theme; three articles relating to any one topic is the limit. If students question whether a particular item can be successfully utilized, I encourage them to bring it in so that we can discuss it.

As students select appropriate articles, they are to mount the clippings in their journals attractively and to include documentation in the proper format (we follow MLA style). Students summarize the information contained within each clipping and then, in one or more quality paragraphs of commentary, describe the connections between the clipping and what they have learned in class.

I evaluate the journals according to the number and variety of materials used and concepts related, depth and detail of commentary, and final presentation. Ask students to bind their journals sturdily so that the journals can be displayed in the classroom, where they can promote student discussion of the particular concepts.

(This idea originally appeared in The Leaflet, *1991, published by the New England Association of Teachers of English. Used by permission.)*

Elizabeth Carros Keroack, Methuen High School, Methuen, Massachusetts

Hats On for Character Development

Sometimes an out-of-the-ordinary activity can be an effective teaching tool. I use the following assignment to give my secondary English students an opportunity to synthesize character development and to provide oral and creative experiences. It could also be a voluntary student activity.

After students select a major or minor character from a literary work that is being studied in class, I give them the following instructions:

1. Think about your character's personality. What motivates the character? How do the other characters feel about your character? What words come to mind when you think about your character?
2. Design a hat that you feel your character would wear. This hat must fit the character revelation developed within the play (or novel, poem, or short story).
3. Find quotations from the work that will support your hat design and the image of the character that you are attempting to portray.
4. The hat that you design must be wearable. You will be expected to model your hat.
5. Develop a character sketch of your chosen character. The personality characteristics and the quotations that you initially chose must be integrated into the sketch.
6. As you model your hat, become the character and present your character sketch from memory. Your performance should be between three and five minutes.

An alternative assignment would be to have students write a few paragraphs explaining how the hat fits the particular character's personality and support their arguments with quotations from the text. Or students might work in groups of three or four to brainstorm ideas about their chosen character and to design an appropriate hat for the character. One student might model the hat while a second student reads aloud the character sketch.

I sometimes bring a camera to class to record the character hats for a bulletin board display. While the activity produces many laughs, it also produces new insight into some of the characters in the novels, plays, poems, and short stories that we read.

Laurel L. Steill, Columbia City High School, Columbia City, Indiana

Presidential Problem Solving

My juniors, typical of many students their age, struggled with early American literature, finding it "boring." I wanted to find an essay prompt for the exam that would enable them to be creative and to see the practical

applications of this type of literature. I also wanted to find an activity that would provide unique reinforcement for their efforts at working their way through the readings. The following is the assignment that I gave my students:

> You are writing a letter to the president of the United States. In the manner of Crevecoeur, tell the president what being an American means to you. Then, in the manner of Franklin, find a problem in America today and use reason to analyze the problem. Name and explain the steps that should be taken in solving the problem. Finally, in the rhetorical manner of Henry and Paine, persuade the president that your solution is the best one. (Have fun with this assignment. Be sure to bring a stamped envelope to class. We're really going to send these!)

As expected, my students thought that I was crazy and that this assignment was "stupid." They were certain that nobody would read these letters—certainly not the president. To humor me, they wrote the letters, mailed them, and then waited. Not long afterward, replies from presidential staff members began coming in the mail to the students. They were surprised to see that the letters they received were not generic form letters. Instead, the writers addressed the topics for which the students had expressed concern, and also informed them of recent developments in those areas. Surprisingly, two students actually received letters from President Bush. The excitement of all the students, particularly the lucky two, indicated that they had received the reinforcement that they needed.

Jill S. Holland, H.H. Goddard High School, Columbus, Ohio

3 Prewriting and Writing

Asking students to put pencil to paper (or fingertips to computer keyboard) does not always produce the clear, concise writing that we seek. But our chances of success are increased when we offer our students a variety of writing assignments that draw on differing interests or talents. The teaching ideas that follow provide numerous opportunities for introspection and self-expression. These activities encourage words to flow as students write in toy-evaluation journals and adventure journals, become consumer reporters, focus on establishing tone, devise dialogues, and put their classroom daydreams to use.

A Lesson on Bias

The following activity will help students learn a lesson from the *National Enquirer.* It is most effective after a class discussion of such concepts and terms as connotation, denotation, bias, slant, tone, point of view, and loaded words.

My students began by reading a *National Enquirer* story about a stray dog that was inadvertently hit by a New York subway driver. The driver, of course, was portrayed in the article like a serial killer.

Then students paired up with another student or formed small groups of students. I handed out the following guidelines and asked the students to respond to the questions.

1. Decide what kind of background music would be an appropriate accompaniment for this article. What instruments would be used? Be able to defend your choice. Identify the tone of the article and explain its connection to the music.
2. Skim the article, highlighting with a yellow marker all the loaded words. Are there few or many words highlighted? What does this tell you about the story?
3. Divide a piece of paper into two columns. List all the highlighted words that have negative connotations in one column and the words

with positive connotations in the other column. Indicate to whom or what each word refers. Draw a conclusion about the connection between word choice and slant of an article. Be able to defend your conclusions.

4. Skim the story once again, this time highlighting with a green marker the actual facts that are presented. Summarize what actually occurred in that subway. Include details that answer where, who, what, and when. Rewrite the entire account in one concise statement of fact.
5. Decide whether this story has a bias and, if so, who it favors. How would the slant change if the story had been written from the point of view of someone who wanted to get rid of mongrel strays in the subways? Defend your position. Would the *National Enquirer* use the story if it were presented from a different point of view? Defend your position.
6. Decide the purpose of the *National Enquirer* story and the intended audience. What might affect the way a reader interprets this account? What kind of skills might help a reader interpret this account objectively?

At this point I asked each small group of students to pair with another group and then asked each of these large groups to discuss their findings. I explained that besides listening to their answers, I would be looking for appropriate use of the following terms and concepts: tone, point of view, bias, slant, connotation, denotation, loaded words, fact, opinion, audience, and purpose.

Then I made an additional assignment. Students could choose to work as independent reporters or on reporting teams of two or three students. I set out stacks of old newspapers and gave students the following directions:

> You have been hired as a reporter for the *National Perspirer.* Select a story from one of the newspapers. Identify the facts. Now rewrite the story in the style of the *National Enquirer*—really stretch it! Include pictures and headlines. Form response teams for revising and editing, and prepare a final draft on newsprint for exhibition. Each reporter or reporting team will present to the class a factual account and the *Perspirer* point of view.

The following week, students presented stories demonstrating the two points of view and exhibited their *National Perspirer* newspapers. They demonstrated their increased understanding of the concepts and terms that we had studied when they easily passed an unannounced test the following week.

Rosemary Faucette, Woodland Junior High School, Fayetteville, Arkansas

Consumer Reporting

I have devised an activity in which students participate in research, analyze the results, and publish their findings as consumer reporters. And because the topic is potato chips, their interest always runs high. You will need to gather three different brands of potato chips (I recommend a store brand, a locally produced brand, and a national brand), napkins, and containers for the chips labeled A, B, and C.

I explain to students that they are participating in a blank taste test, the Great Potato Chip Comparison. They are to make no comments aloud so that they do not unintentionally prejudice someone else's opinion. Chips and napkins are distributed, and students keep their three piles of chips separate while they record their perceptions of the appearance, aroma, flavor, and texture of each brand of chips. Each student ranks the brands in order of preference; these test results are recorded on a chart on the board so that they will be available to students later in the assignment.

Once I reveal the brand names of the chips, students request other information that would be pertinent to their evaluations: price per ounce, ingredients, and nutritional information. They interview one another to gather individual assessments of the chips.

Students complete the assignment by taking on the role of reporters and by writing an article designed to help the consumer select the best potato chip. They discuss strategies for organizing the material and for conveying it to the reader in an upbeat, interesting manner, including statistics from the taste test and quotations from one another. Final drafts are published by displaying them in the classroom for all to read.

Mary Knisely Reith, Theodore Roosevelt High School, Kent, Ohio

How to Handle a Journal

Journals provide an important outlet for students' feelings and perceptions, but sometimes they need a little guidance in how they approach their journals. I give students the following suggestions (adapted from ideas from Ruth Tharp) to help them avoid being intimidated by a blank page.

> Think of your journal as a jewelry box for gems: for quotes (yours and others'), pithy ideas, epigrams, clever phrases, insights, analogies, puns, words of wisdom.
>
> Think of your journal as a snapshot album and yourself as a roving photographer clicking a shutter on life. Include light and dark contrasts, color, texture, angles and circles, portraits, landscapes. See life through various lenses: telescopic, microscopic, wide-angle, and closeup.
>
> Think of your journal as a giant wardrobe into which you can step to try on marvelous clothes. Put on other styles, look in the mirror, and see how you look. Be Parisian, Ethiopian, or East Indian. Be rich or poor. What do you see? How do you feel? What will you do in the new clothes? Try poetry—phrases, not rhymes.
>
> Think of your journal as a drafting board. Blank pages will become blueprints, plans for a future house. Accuracy, careful detail, and sharp lines are important; avoid smudges on the pages. If you are an idea-person, what will you build? Watch your idea-house grow, as you add bedrooms for the birth of new thoughts.
>
> Think of your journal as a tape recorder attached directly to your brain. Record your stream-of-consciousness thoughts, your associated thoughts. Don't fuss for words; write as fast as you think. Use dashes, dots; skip lines and spaces.
>
> Think of your journal as a letter to yourself. What would you like yourself to know? What would you want to remember ten years from now? To which of your selves will you choose to write? Turn your journal into a dialogue with yourself. Argue, debate, reconcile.
>
> Think of your journal as a history memoir and yourself as a VIP: the average citizen. Write for an extraterrestrial reader,

or for a terrestrial reader in the twenty-second century. Let him or her or it know how we lived and thought.

Think of your journal as a travelogue. See afresh, as if you were born yesterday or had recently distilled from life on another planet. Record the quaint customs, lore, folkways, speech patterns, superstitions, magic, and miraculous sights of your terrain. Chart the unknown; fill in the map of the world with words. Become all tongue, all eyeball, all nose; become the world's ear. Put yourself in others' minds, especially people whom you dislike or who seem foreign to you. Reach out into the void; reach up or down or out to find ways of telling others what you believe.

Pamela J. Lentine, Downers Grove North High School, Downers Grove, Illinois

Establishing Tone in Descriptive Writing

This idea works with junior high and middle school students. It helps young writers establish tone, the way they feel about a subject. In descriptive writing, this subject may be an object, a scene, or a person.

I ask students to focus their thoughts on the halls of our school at passing time between classes. They are to think about their five senses and then to list the descriptive sensory details that they associate with the hallways, indicating whether each detail has a negative or positive association. To aid their organization, I hand out a simple form that contains separate columns for sensory details supporting a negative tone and those supporting a positive tone. When their lists are complete, students might write two brief descriptive paragraphs to demonstrate both a positive and a negative tone.

I then ask students to write a paragraph describing their arrival at a restaurant, a doctor's office, a summer camp, or a party. Before writing, students sort details and sensations into either a positive or negative tone and fill out the chart accordingly. They select the tone for the paragraph and then use elements from the appropriate column as they write.

The following is typical of the list of sensory details that a student would prepare on the topic of the dentist's office:

Senses	*Negative Tone*	*Positive Tone*
Sounds	canned music; drill	squeaky noise of tooth polisher
Smells	antiseptic smell; receptionist's perfume	vase of tulips on receptionist's desk
Sights	pointed, hooklike dental tools	animal pictures on the ceiling
Textures	fake leather chairs	slippery, shiny polished teeth
Tastes	cherry fluoride treatment	cold water for rinsing

James H. Thompson, Bozeman High School, Bozeman, Montana

Toy-Evaluation Journals

Toys in the high school classroom? Absolutely, especially when it comes to teaching critical thinking.

Critical thinking always seems to be a foggy area to teach to students of average or below-average ability. The following activity works because most high schoolers are not that far removed from the world of Barbie dolls and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Indeed, many of our students still play with toys. And almost every student has an idea of what makes a toy appropriate.

Students begin by writing an essay about their own favorite childhood toy, including a vivid description of the toy, their memories of playing with it, and how it might have aided their development.

Next, assemble a wide variety of toys in the classroom. Students might bring in toys from home, other teachers might loan some to the classroom, and some might be obtained

from public libraries with a toy-lending program. Students form small groups of four or five persons and evaluate seven to ten different toys in terms of the skills that each toy might teach a child.

A whole-class discussion might center on the values that toys teach us. Ask students to consider whether toys are a reflection of our society. Does buying a Barbie doll mean that we value a certain unattainable, idealized beauty? What message do boys receive when advertisements or commercials show only girls playing with My Little Pony figures? What message do the four male Ninja Turtles convey to girls? This is apt to be a lively and conflicting discussion since many high school students have definite and differing ideas about the appropriateness of toys.

As a culminating project, I distribute the following directions:

> Now that you have read about and discussed toys, as well as played with some toys of the past and the present, I'd like you to look at some current toys with the critical eye of both a consumer and a prospective parent/educator. You are to select at least three toys, think carefully about each toy, and write a detailed journal entry for each toy.
>
> First, select pictures of three toys from catalogs, magazines, or newspaper ads. Try to choose toys of different types (for example, not all dolls or stuffed animals) and try not to pick toys that are specifically intended for girls or for boys.
>
> Be sure to discuss the following in each journal entry:
>
> - the name and price of the toy
> - a physical description of the toy, including approximate size, color, features, and material
> - the intended use and the age range of the child using the toy
> - the skills that the toy might help a child learn
> - the values that the toy might teach a child (remember that values are those attitudes or habits that are important to society as a whole or to some people)
> - your rating of each toy's play value (that is, how long you think a child would play with the toy, different ways in which a child might play with the toy)
> - whether you would purchase this toy if you had an income of $5.00 per hour

Some additional points that you might want to discuss are the following:

- your ideas for improving the toy
- your idea for an original ad to sell the toy
- your suggestions for simplifying the toy or modifying it for a different age group

Decorate your toy journal as you please. Be as creative as you like. The final project is due _____ .

Have fun!

Linda S. Boxleitner, Methuen High School, Methuen, Massachusetts

A Dream of a Better World

Here's an activity that takes advantage of students' natural inclination toward daydreaming. Begin by asking the class to do some daydreaming about what would make our world a better place. Suggest that there may be some things that we could do without, and some things that we could use more of in order to improve the world.

Ask each student to list five things that the world could do *without.* You may wish to start everyone out on the right track by giving a few examples or by asking volunteers for suggestions. Some possible responses that students might list are hatred, prejudice, crime, AIDS, cancer, pollution, drug abuse, guns, trash, homelessness, poverty, overpopulation, war, nuclear weapons, alcoholism, fighting, murder, stealing, lying, jealousy, oil spills, starvation, unwanted pregnancy, chemical weapons, divorce, bad schools, and forest fires. Working in small groups or as a class, students share the items on their *without* lists. They add any new items to their own lists.

Then ask students to make another list, this time focusing on the things that the world could use *more of.* Here students might suggest love, peace, freedom, friendship, laughter, caring, honor, loyalty, hope, honesty, food for the hungry, cures for diseases, good music, good books, jobs for all who want to work, adequate wages, brotherhood, conservation of natural resources, religion, better schools, and better teachers. Again, have students pool their suggestions and add new items to their *more of* lists.

Next, ask students to use their *without* and *more of* lists to write about a dream that they have for making the world a better place for all its

people. I start my students out with some suggestions for a beginning sentence:

I dream of a world without . . .

My dream is of a world without . . .

I dream of a world with more . . .

My dream is of a world with more . . .

Students are to develop two paragraphs about improving the world—one about what the world could do without and the other about what the world needs more of. I ask students to use complete sentences and to include up to three items from their lists in each sentence, but no more than three. One or two items per sentence will provide a nice rhythm in this prose poem. Repeating the beginning sentence will add to this rhythm and will add a forcefulness to the sentences. I stress to students that they are not simply to repeat the entries on their lists. They are to focus on those items that they feel are most important in making the world a better place.

When the rough drafts are completed, students work with partners or triads. They may trade papers for silent reading or read papers aloud in a low voice. Partners may point out weaknesses or the failure to follow guidelines, offer suggestions for improvement, and help correct spelling or punctuation errors in the first draft.

Students use their partners' suggestions to write a final version. These polished papers may be read aloud to the whole class, passed around the room for silent reading, submitted for a literary magazine or contest, or posted in the room.

Ken Spurlock, Holmes High School, Covington, Kentucky

Talking to the Animals

Encouraging my writing-across-the-curriculum biology students to write fiction is never easy. While discussing a newspaper article on Florida manatees with the class, I came across a technique that has proved successful.

The article was about how humans are loving this creature to death. Drawn by a dawning environmental awareness, curious tourists are flocking to the manatee haunts, thus creating even more problems for

these gentle and vulnerable animals. Many gawkers come in boats, the manatees' only significant predator.

Abandoning my plans to have students write a letter to a congressperson urging the establishment of a federal park for protecting the manatees, I instead tried a different approach. I encouraged students to close their eyes and rest their heads on their arms while I transported them to the Florida coast by relating the following:

> You and a friend decide to leave Chicago during semester break and drive to Florida. Tired from the long drive, you pull off the road by an isolated cove for a little rest. The water is so warm and inviting that you can't resist a swim. Your friend stays on shore.
>
> It's a wonderful scene: the mangrove trees, the tepid water, the singing birds. Floating easily on the brackish water, you lose track of time. You doze off for a moment.
>
> Suddenly you bump against something soft. Startled awake, you turn in the water. You're eyeball to eyeball with one of those manatees that you remember discussing in biology class. Alarmed at first, you remember that they are harmless, interested only in their families and munching on water hyacinths. Still, it's larger than you had imagined.
>
> Nothing else exists, just you and the manatee. You're sure it won't harm you. You study its face, noticing every wrinkle, every whisker. You see a nasty scar on its back and know it's from a speedboat.
>
> Then, incredibly, the manatee opens its mouth and speaks to you. You're stunned, but you understand every word. It talks for four or five minutes and then submerges.
>
> You swim to shore. Your friend has been sleeping the entire time. Do you tell your friend? Your friend will think that you've gone over the edge this time for sure. You've got to share this amazing experience, but with whom? Then it clicks. You'll write to your biology teacher. He'll understand; he'll believe.
>
> Now I want you to reflect about the manatee for a moment. Then take out a piece of paper and compose that letter to me. Tell me, line for line, exactly what that manatee said to you.

This is an assignment that inspires students. They quickly put themselves inside the manatee's skin. Their letters reflect a basic understanding of the fragility of nature that is deeper than I suspected. I find that the assignment is the perfect lead-in to a discussion of ecology, pollution, habitat destruction, and endangered species. It seems that by talking to a manatee for a while, students develop empathy, and their ability and willingness to express this empathy increases greatly.

There is another benefit to this assignment. My writing-across-the-curriculum biology students usually are reticent to write due to a fear of making grammatical mistakes. At least with this particular assignment, that hang-up disappears. As one student told me, "How good could a manatee talk, anyway?"

Larry Linderman, Daley Community College, Chicago, Illinois

Banish Those Dialogue Demons!

"Here's my story, Mrs. Casserly. You'll love it," Christie enthused as she shoved a ten-page handwritten manuscript in the fifth-period folder.

Smiling, I told her that I would read it that night. Hours later, I picked up her paper eagerly. In the past, this student showed a definite proficiency with description and plot development. But halfway down the first page, I threw my green pen down in frustration. Five characters sat around a table in a pizza parlor, all gasping over the "awesome party" that they had attended the night before. Their words loomed off the page at me; so what was the problem? Nowhere in sight were paragraphs used to show the change of speaker, and although quotation marks were used, only occasionally were they accurate.

The lack of the proper use of quotation marks in dialogue as well as correct dialogue format had been the bane of my writing teacher existence. I had previously used excerpts from students' writing as examples for the class, but obviously not enough. I needed a more effective lesson, one that would help students feel ownership of their writing.

My determination led to a series of lessons on dialogue that has proven to be highly successful. No longer do my students display serious problems when writing dialogue.

Five class periods are needed for these lessons, but only the fifth lesson will take the entire class period. Since my students begin each day with a journal entry, for the first four days I choose topics that need to be

written in dialogue form. I might ask students to transcribe a conversation that they had with a friend, or I might give them a specific topic for a two-person dialogue, such as the following openers:

> "Guess what I just heard?"
> "I said, 'Sit down!'" the principal muttered through clenched teeth as a muscle twitched in his jaw like a throbbing pulse.
> "I am so excited I'd float away if it weren't for these boots," Jenny said as she grabbed Todd's arm.

As students write, I circle the room, selecting a different student each day to write his or her conversation on the board. At the end of the class, we orally correct any errors in format or quotation mark usage, with students referring to the dialogue portion of a writing handbook and citing the rule.

By the fifth day, students have had enough practice with dialogue to move to a phase in which they will be graded. Students pair up with another student; if we have an uneven number of students, I become one student's partner. Each pair of students chooses a card from the two sets of cards that I have previously prepared.

On one set of cards, the character cards, I have written two particular characters who are to be involved in a conversation. Some are rather ordinary: a former boyfriend and girlfriend, a dentist and patient, two six-year-old boys, or a grandparent and grandchild. Some are outlandish: a skunk and a fox, a pro football player and George Washington, or a heavy-metal guitarist and a concert pianist. On the second set of cards, the setting cards, I have written different settings: a pond, a fire station, the school cafeteria, Mount Everest, and so on. Although some of the settings and characters do not seem to mix, I allow no substitutions.

Students are given one minute to decide on a topic for conversation, who will play which character, and which student will "speak" first. From this point on, *no* talking is allowed. The first student writes, in character, the first conversational tidbit on a sheet of paper and then passes the paper to his or her partner. The second student reads what is written, and responds in writing. The exercise continues for fifteen minutes, as students develop a dialogue that connects both characters and the setting.

When the time is up, each pair of students switches papers with another pair and corrects the papers for quotation mark usage and dialogue

format, subtracting one point for each error. Papers are then returned to their rightful owners, and those students must correct any errors that they have made, citing the rules or reasons, such as to begin a new paragraph every time that the speaker changes.

Pairs are then asked to read their dialogues aloud. This is one oral sharing experience where I never lack for volunteers. Students are always vociferous in their pleas to read their dialogues aloud.

I plan this lesson for early in the semester. Many students will later want to write stories with dialogues, and this strategy prepares them. Afterward, I keep the character and setting cards available for those students who want to use them in warding off writer's block.

Constance D. Casserly, Herndon Intermediate School, Herndon, Virginia

Neighborhood Writing

In the following activity, an adaptation of mapping from Gabriele Rico's *Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers* (Tarcher, 1983), students connect a work of literature to their own environment. For example, as we read *River Song* by Craig Lesley, we discuss its theme of the assimilation of American Indian culture with the American corporate lifestyle. In the novel, Danny and Jack Kachiah live a nomadic existence, yet there is a geocentric range of places where they travel and live. I apply this idea of community to students' personal neighborhoods.

Students brainstorm a list of perhaps a dozen faces and places from a present or past neighborhood. Next they draw and color a map of their neighborhood, labeling landmarks and points of particular interest to them. They might share and explain these maps to a partner.

Then students select a specific landmark or individual from their lists and write a description of that place or person. Ask them to explain what makes that particular place or face unique. How do others in the neighborhood view it? These compositions could be read aloud or displayed on the bulletin board along with the neighborhood maps.

I've used this same activity as a follow-up to reading *Julius Caesar.* We discuss scenes in which a crucial decision was made within the boundaries of a character's home or neighborhood, such as Brutus's

agonizing decision to turn against his friend and Caesar's vacillation about going to the Senate. Then the activity proceeds as outlined above.

Alex N. Gordin, Cleveland High School, Portland, Oregon

Writing Examination

I use the following activity with my first-year college composition students, but the procedure could be easily adapted for high school students as well.

During the first week of the term, my students write in-class essays on one of many suggested topics or a variation of those topics. I explain that the papers will not be graded, but that they will be saved until the end of the term to be compared with students' final work. I read and save these papers, but refrain from marking anything.

This in-class writing is mandatory. Those who are absent must make up the assignment, in our case at the college testing center. The assignment is comparable in length and difficulty to those done later in the course. Students may use dictionaries and handbooks, if they like.

Throughout the course students get abundant practice on essay analysis by evaluation of sample essays in the textbook and by analysis and discussion in peer review sessions. They learn what is meant by thesis, development, coherence, and organization. They develop awareness of unity, focus, specificity of support, and logical order through hands-on experience with writing and revision.

Before the final exam, I tell students that part of the exam will require them to analyze the draft of a student's essay and to write four specific recommendations about how that essay should be revised. They will be graded on the validity of their recommendations. Surface features such as neatness, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are not to be considered; rather, students must focus on the attributes of composition studied all quarter.

On final exam day, after students have received the other exam material, I walk around the room and give each student his or her impromptu essay from the first day of class. Upon seeing that paper, some students are puzzled. "This is the wrong paper," said one. "This is the one I wrote at the start of the quarter." My response was something like, "Is there any other writer whose writing is more important to you, any other writing more deserving of your analysis?" Most students realize at

once what I'm getting at. Based on what they have learned in the course, they are to demonstrate that they can subject their own work to critical analysis.

There are three advantages to having students evaluate their own writing. First, students are expected to apply concretely the principles stressed throughout the course. They are graded according to their grasp of those principles.

Second, the exam is manageable. Students are able to recommend improvements, and their recommendations are easier for me to critique under the pressure of final exam week than a new essay.

Third, and most important, students see for themselves what progress they have made during the term. They realize that they have acquired a sense of what to look for in a piece of writing—exactly what they ought to learn in a writing course.

Carol Pemberton, Normandale Community College, Bloomington, Minnesota

Adventure Journals

This activity can be done either in class or as a homework assignment. Students form groups of four or five (or more, depending on the size of your class). Each group is assigned a particular place for its adventure, such as Venice, Mount Everest, or the Amazon River. Students could also select their own locations. You might wish to incorporate a geography lesson at this point by asking students to research the place to which they are going.

Explain to students that for the next few weeks they will be traveling on an adventure with the others in their group. They will encounter various predicaments and problems and will have to devise their own solutions. The only restrictions are that they cannot use magic and may not kill anyone. Guns or other weapons might also be outlawed. I have always asked my students to write individual journal entries, but they could also work together to prepare a joint journal entry.

Students' first assignment is to spend thirty minutes writing about how they will get from their hometown to the site of their particular adventure. Will they go by foot, car, train, airplane, or boat? What items would be appropriate to pack? At this point students do not know just what adventures they might encounter, but ask them to plan for logical prob-

lems or situations. A group traveling down the Amazon might want to bring along a machete to cut through jungle grasses, while another group in Venice or Paris would have little use for it.

The following day students meet in their groups to read aloud what they have written in their journals. They select one journal entry to read aloud to the entire class.

Every week students continue with their adventure journals. I give each group a particular problem to overcome, usually involving one group member. For example, the Amazon explorers may run into incredible rapids that overturn a raft, spilling all the food into the river. Or perhaps one of the explorers gets tossed overboard and needs rescuing. The journal entries need to explain just how the problem is resolved. Each group member should write from his or her point of view, so I try to have the problem situation involve a different member each week. The groups continue to meet weekly and to discuss the different solutions that the members have chosen.

I have used this activity for as many as eight weeks in a row and then let students come to their own conclusions in the final week. The activity could continue for a longer time if students are given new destinations or are reassigned to a different group.

This type of writing has a great deal of flexibility for both the teacher and the students. What's more, my students have reacted positively and have thoroughly enjoyed coming up with solutions to the problems that they encounter on their imaginary adventures.

Edward L. Brown, St. Paul's School, Brooklandville, Maryland

Writing Strategies Using Art Prints

Because composition work is a large part of our district's courses, I developed yearlong writing strategies in order to build students' confidence and skill in writing. I originally developed these strategies for juniors, but I have found seniors just as responsive, and ninth graders even more so.

The first stage begins in early September. The class opens with a writing period, with actual writing time a total of three minutes (which will evolve to seven or more minutes as students begin to demand more time for their writing). I ask students to write rapidly for the entire time provided, making no stops, corrections, or word selections according to

notions of "rightness" or "dumbness." They are to try to write all that comes to mind as quickly as possible. I explain that they will be sure that their writing hands will fall off during the first session or two, but that this stage will be temporary.

I add structure to the writing assignment by providing the subject matter. I have found that art prints are an effective way to encourage students' responses. I start with Edward Hopper, an American artist who lived from 1882 to 1967. I display large posters of Hopper's "Nighthawks" (1942), "Seven A.M." (1948), and "Approaching a City" (1946) and present a brief sketch of Hopper, including his reputation as a painter of loneliness and isolation, his preoccupation with light, and his presentation of people. Next, I steer students to a discussion of the painting by asking the first two questions for determining internal cues while examining a work of art: "What do you see?" (such as shapes, lines, color, value) and "How are things put together?" (such as balance, emphasis, variety, proportion). In addition, I ask whatever questions are needed to get students past whether they like the painting or not, for their opinions can be a barrier when interpreting literature, music, or art.

After familiarizing students with the prints through the class discussion, I then make the writing assignment: students are to "step into" one of the prints, turn around to view the full picture, and see what happens. They are to begin their writing with "I step into . . ." and then to write continuously for the time period. After three such writings, most students are already able to continue writing nonstop for about three minutes.

In the second stage of the writing strategies, we move from a single artist to postcards from postcard books, with each student having a print by a different artist. Most art museums, art stores, or bookstores have these books available. I have used cards from *Treasures from the National Museum of American Art, Masterpieces from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery,* and *French Impressionism—Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,* although almost any collection of nonabstract art would work well. Again, I use the first two questions: "What do you see?" and "How are things put together?" The students still step into the picture to see what happens, but by this time most of them have a plot scenario ready to burst forth from their pens without any preplanning. Their descriptive skills have improved, and their imaginations leap from one

possibility to the next without worry about "correctness" according to their classmates or me. They write freely and easily.

During the third stage, I add a third question: "What is the artist trying to say?" By this point students are ready to include some of the literary aspects that they are studying in class, such as mood, tone, setting, characterization, and symbol. I encourage them to transfer what they are learning about literature interpretation to their art interpretation skills by asking if a painting can have mood, tone, setting, or symbols. Students generally find this kind of writing focus more difficult, so they write less than usual for the first two or three times that we try this approach. But soon they involve their imaginations more and accomplish much more writing.

In the fourth and final stage of my writing strategies, I present either a single artist's work (such as a painting by Manet, Monet, O'Keeffe, Toulouse-Lautrec) or postcard collections (such as *Masterpieces of Painting from the Brooklyn Museum, Great Impressionistic and Post-Impressionistic Painting from the Art Institute of Chicago,* and *Art Postcards from the Vienna Workshop*). I even show slides of abstract art, either paintings or sculpture. I direct students to consider the artist's use of color or shape as a possible symbol or theme. By this time, after some sixteen weeks of art analysis, students understand symbol and theme as abstract concepts in literature and are able to transfer these concepts to art prints. I review what we have learned by varying the approach that they are to take in the writing assignment: step into the painting, apply a single literary concept, apply symbol, apply theme, or respond to a painting that appeals to them. The varying of assignment, artist, and art prints increases student enthusiasm for this writing strategy.

The results of these several writing strategies are positive. Students increase the amount of writing they do, from perhaps six lines during the first three-minute session to covering an entire paper, front and half of the back, in a six-minute session. And when I indicate that the session is over and that students should finish up, they often continue writing for another two or three minutes before they are satisfied that they have said all that needs saying. In addition to the increased amount of writing, the weekly sessions help students improve their usage, spelling, and punctuation without ever worrying about their mistakes. Finally, students are developing a sense of art appreciation and criticism. They are able to

recognize other works by the artists that we have studied and to comment on artwork that they see in magazines, on television, on calendars, or even at the mall.

Beverly S. Proulx, Rush City High School, Rush City, Minnesota

Looking for Sensory Details

This cooperative prewriting activity helps students focus on using specific details in descriptive writing. I have used the idea with my sophomores and juniors. It is effective because students know firsthand what a bedroom or special room can say about the person who resides there.

Students work in groups of three or four. Each group divides a large sheet of white paper into six sections. They label the top of each section with a particular person's room. Examples that work well are a teenage boy's room, a teenage girl's room, an old woman's room, an old man's room, a baby's room, a toddler's room, and an athlete's room. Students have also used the room of a scientist, a hunter, a teacher, and a hippie.

Next, students fill in details that would be specific to each room. I have them use four different colored pens: one color for things that can be seen, another for things that can be heard, the third for things that can be smelled, and the fourth for the overall feeling about the room. The activity requires specific details, such as a straw hat with a lavender ribbon or a painting of a yellow vase of lilies of the valley.

After I post the papers around the room, students check the work done by other groups and make constructive comments. For example, a student might point out that a blue bedspread could belong to anyone and ask whether it has a particular style or pattern that makes it unique to the individual.

This prewriting exercise has prepared the students for the descriptive writing assignment that follows. They select a particular room, picking from their own group's list or that of another group, and write a paper that begins with the sentence "I could tell when I entered the room that it belonged to . . ." Students describe the decor and personal effects that they notice in the room and explain why these items are appropriate to that particular character.

Students enjoy this cooperative prewrite, and their finished products reflect a more careful choice of details.

Cleora J. Hampton, Henley High School, Klamath Falls, Oregon

Irresistible Ear Poems

With both male and female students sporting earrings these days, ear poems might be a novel way to approach poetry. Ear poems can excite and motivate students. They can be used to introduce a poetry unit or to reinforce the teaching of poetic devices and forms.

Writing such tiny sentiments requires students to compress and distill—to capture the heart of the matter. The small strip of rectangular paper compels students to work and rework a simile, metaphor, or image until it fits the allotted space, such as "Spider webs—sun hammocks."

Alliteration, end rhyme, onomatopoeia, personification, and metonymy are suitable for line emphasis. As for poetic forms, the spirit (but not necessarily the exact form) of haiku is easily adapted to ear poems.

Haiku asks that one look into the heart of things, recognize the transitory nature of our lives, affirm the beauty of the changing of the seasons, and celebrate even the smallest creatures. By looking at concrete imagery in famous haiku, students are inspired to create their own lines. The poet Issa Kobayashi (1763–1827) provides a good example: "Be careful cricket / I'm rolling over!" A poem by one of my students written in this spirit made a set of wonderful earrings: "The child cries and cries and cries / reaching for the fireflies."

Students begin their poetry earrings by cutting two rectangular strips that are no larger than ½″ × 2″. A sturdy paper works best, such as brown paper bags, thin cardboard, colored paper glued to cardboard, or white rag bond. Inexpensive stainless steel jeweler's ear hooks, available at most craft stores, are attached with buttonhole thread, embroidery thread, or yarn.

Students might wish to choose the format of their ear poems, or they might appreciate a few suggestions:

1. Sport seasonable ears: wear an image of winter on one ear, spring on the other.
2. Consider slogans as bumper stickers for the ears. Deliver a message.
3. Use Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" as a model for creating original words.
4. Write limericks for laughing ears.

Students who have worn these ear poems in public have reported that dangling a message from their ears can spark unusual conversations. Giving the poems as gifts can deliver a personal message or make a public statement. The size of the ear poems may be small, but they get the point across.

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